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PRINCIPLES OF CHURCH FEDERATION

III. ALLIANCES NEEDFUL FOR THE LOCAL CHURCH

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We have said a great deal about "the New Testament church." In the mind of Jesus it did not appear to bulk large, at least in name. He did not describe it; he set forth none of its characteristics as it now exists in modern forms. It would be difficult to read into any of the New Testament passages a description of any one of the churches of the present time with which we are familiar. Jesus spoke of "the kingdom" and "the kingdom of God," and described a renewed and a reformed society; but he "organized" nothing.

Discipleship and Service

Jesus left behind no "model" constitution and by-laws; he held no "church meeting," presided over by a moderator, aided by a secretary and committees. Only twice is the word "church" (or *ecclesia*) laid upon his lips, and then, apparently, in none of our modern uses of the word. Christian community, or Christian society, or even the collective plural, Christians, would seem to correspond to his thought when he says (Matt. 18:17), "And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church; but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican," for later, in the same immediate connection, he adds, "Where two or three are gathered in my name,

there am I in the midst of them" (vs. 20), as though the assembly, voluntary in character, without roll-call or formal organization, was characterized only by his "name" and then by his presence.

To explain and defend the meaning of the word "church" in Matt. 16:18 might open the flood-gates of discussion and debate: "And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." This at least, however, can be said without controversy, that the tenses of the verbs are future and the declarations are not descriptive of facts existing at the time of utterance, but are prophetic, so that at the time there was no objective church, actually existing, to which we may look for an understanding of the church's bounds and functions.

Were we to read the Gospel of Mark, or Luke, or John, we should never know that the name "church," or the thought of "a church" had ever been in the mind of Jesus.

No man has yet fathomed the depths of that wondrously transparent and simple mind. It has been the study of the centuries; it is the problem of scholars still. Yet one is safe in saying that two great conceptions constantly dominated the thoughts of Jesus and determined and directed his activities; these

may be expressed in the two words "discipleship" and "service." He called men to himself; gracious invitations breathed from his presence; his movements and his gestures suggested approach; his eyes appeared to express a welcome. Throngs followed him; women and children were not afraid; the sinful and the despised found in him a friend; the leprous and the loathsome were not turned away. And as men came unto his physical presence, then he taught them the principles of his life and revealed unto them the thoughts and purposes of God, in order that they might follow him in a spiritual sense. He was the light of the world; he was the great teacher; he was the way and the truth and the life. He wanted men to be his disciples. This seems to have been his wish for all the world. This is an expression of fellowship, divine fellowship.

But men were not to follow him as a simple pastime nor for mere selfish advantage; they were to follow him in order to serve others. He came himself for ministry; that was the end and object of his career. All his preparation, all his words, all his acts, all his sacrifices were for the sake of others. He laid down his life for the world, as, in response to the love of God for the world, he had come into the world. To serve and to save the world was the goal of his desires. His followers must serve others, exemplifying the fellowship of suffering and of service.

A New Test of Orthodoxy

These great characteristics of Jesus, unattained as yet by his followers, are the real notes of a church. Though

the church be housed in a richly ornamented gothic temple, though its membership be composed of the most cultured and influential citizens of a town or commonwealth, though its orthodoxy and zeal be the theme of the fireside and the press, though its pulpit speak with the tongue of men and of angels, yet if it fails to reach out unto Jesus Christ as its ideal, and if it seeks only to maintain its own comfortable existence, it may be but a social club of respectable folks, a society for intellectual and ethical nurture, "sounding brass and a clanging cymbal," or little better than that which Paul calls "nothing."

Whatever may be our opinion of the New Testament conception of the church, whether of baptized or unbaptized members, whether of adults only or of children as well, whether organized congregationally, presbyterianly, episcopally, or papally, whether a local group of believers within a city or composed of all of the believers within a city, whether existing as branches of some mother-church elsewhere or independent of Jerusalem, Antioch, Rome, and Alexandria, whatever may be our understanding of the origin and development of the church, we must acknowledge that *that* is not a church which merely has a name and an organization within a consecrated edifice; it must have the marks of discipleship and ministry, it must look up unto Jesus as its ideal for comprehension and imitation, it must look out unto men and so love the world of men, irrespective of race, place, station, or condition, as to seek their welfare and evangelization.

These marks give a new test of orthodoxy and efficiency. In many instances

modifications should be made of our theories of church independency and autonomy. If a local church is not large enough to translate and publish the Scriptures and to print and circulate tracts, when these are needed for service to men, then the local church is incomplete as a church and not fully and fairly worthy of the title of church; if the local church cannot by itself establish and maintain schools and colleges for the education of men in imitation of the great Teacher, quickening and developing the human mind, then the local church is incomplete as a church and needs the fellowship of other churches in order to fill out the churchly conception; if the local church cannot of itself send forth and maintain missionaries at home and abroad, then, provided these missionary functions of the church are a part of the thought of Christ for the church, the local church is not a church, strictly speaking, for more than it can possess alone is required to make up its deficiencies and fill out its gaps. The church to be a church must at least aim at and approximate the ideal set for it by Jesus Christ.

Completeness through Alliances

If what we have hitherto called the church is imperfect and incomplete in the direction of its ideals and aims, have we not had an erroneous idea of the church? Have we not mistaken a fragment for the whole? The whole must possess and exercise the functions of the whole. If the part cannot, then the part is not a unit. This may be but another way of saying that size and ability are tests of ecclesiastical values. At least, we must acknowledge that if

numerical littleness involves the loss of essential qualities, then numbers and bigness, at least to the degree of efficiency, are indispensable to a church. This may not mean that that which we now term a church, consisting of but twenty or forty members on the countryside, must disband, or must count itself as excommunicated or in any measure unchurched; but rather, with all due recognition of its inabilities in certain directions, it should regard itself with meekness, and should seek the fellowship of the larger brotherhood in the prosecution of the plans of the kingdom. The little church should at least realize that it has not full right or title to the name of a church, unless it co-operates with other churches in the missionary enterprises of the kingdom. It must put itself into those relations with others which will enable it to perform the full functions of the church. If the big church can be missionary by itself, it must be missionary in order to be a Christian church. If the little church cannot maintain missionary enterprises by itself, it must then combine with others; and the denominational organizations and missionary boards are necessary for the realization of its highest powers. They are not, then, to be regarded as outside of and extraneous to the church—by some fortuitous chance of history grafted upon the church, or attached as parasites; they are essential to the very existence of the church itself; they are co-ordinate parts of a whole.

In some places the church has been subjected to severe criticism, as having lost its vitality and even its right to be. We have been told that men have hissed

the church, although they have cheered the name of Christ. If the criticism is ever just, even in part, the reason, doubtless, is to be found in the fact that the church has struggled for self-preservation; isolated and alone, it has given the impression to men that it had departed from the standards of Jesus Christ, that it was no longer in the path of faithful discipleship and was not striving above all else to do good unto others, but, instead, was seeking its own special privileges and advantages, and in some selfish way aimed only at the good of those who "belonged to the order." Concentration of thought and effort upon self, whether of an individual or of an organization, is worthy only of reproach and reproof. Selfishness is selfishness, wherever found; it does not escape notice, nor fail of opprobrium. Though organized under a constitution, it remains the same, and sacred names do not long disguise it.

No better *apologia* can be written by a church than can be wrought into faithful discipleship and generous service unto others. These can be its complete science of apologetics; and there probably is no other. When a church is losing itself in promoting the welfare of the community in which it is placed, and is raising the level of its environment—when it is concerned with the needs and the woes, the sufferings and the ignorance of men, whether near or far—it is recognized as a body with a more than human life energizing and actuating it, the divine spirit becomes manifest in it, and men turn to it with respect and admiration.

The little church must serve others, or suffer condemnation at the bar of

common opinion. "But how can it serve others," someone asks, "when it cannot even take care of itself?" It must federate, is the answer; it must combine and co-operate with others—with its own denomination, first, in the enterprises too large for the little group alone to administer, and then with churches of other orders for the expression of that life which may not otherwise be possible.

Federation is not a mere device for fellowship, however pleasant and at times inspiring that may be, nor for efficiency alone, although that makes all the difference in many instances between success and failure; but is the absolute essential for completeness in the aims and the functions of the church, and without some kind of combination, either in those forms which bear the stamp of denominational organization, or in these newer forms which run across denominational lines, it has been proven in the past that most churches unassociated with others attain but a part of their own life and fail among men to express that message of the life of Christ for which they exist.

Within the Church Itself

The local church itself is a combination of various convictions, experiences, and attainments. No two persons are exactly alike. No one compromises his conscience or his faith by expressing fellowship with another. The lack of conformity, even when conformity is insisted upon, would be amusing, were men disposed to see the humor in their sacred professions. Independent persons cannot flatly agree. Even imitation is a failure, for it cannot be exact.

Fools differ, as well as wise men. Creeds and subscription to creeds have never produced an exactly homogeneous church; and yet in some places men go on making creeds—which is all right, as an intellectual exercise in definition; and in requiring subscription to creeds—which is all wrong, because contrary to the Protestant doctrine of “the right of private judgment,” professed by those who defy it in presenting the creed for subscription.

That first church ever assembled, composed of the twelve men who gathered about our Lord, presented probably as great a variety in personal qualities and formulated convictions as exist today, or ever have existed, in the churches and the sects of the earth. We know some of them well enough to be quite sure of their prevailing characteristics. There was Peter, impulsive, emotional, whose utterance and action invariably preceded thought. No modern Christian, however emotional, out-peters Peter. Then there was Thomas, the investigator, rationalist, and higher critic of the very first order: “Give me evidence, concrete, tangible, positive; let me see, let me handle; or I will not believe.” No ancient or modern scholar has gone farther; few have gone so far. John, reticent, mystical, contemplative, a philosopher, presents a very different type, and Philip, whose quick calculation of the amount of bread necessary for a partial supply of the needs of five thousand men marks him as a man of affairs, practical, active, concrete, is of a yet widely different class. These, however, were assembled by the Lord; they

were his apostolic college. They were not required to conform to each other’s standards, or even to an arbitrary standard set by the Master. They were in fellowship in spite of differences, and by reason of differences the better caught and exemplified the spirit of the Master.

Every denomination has its “right wing” and its “left wing”; every church has its progressives and its conservatives, at least it has those who look for change and are ready for improvement and it has those who are averse to all change and think things are best let alone. These wings and these varying persons, oftentimes groups and parties, should not break apart; they belong together in fellowship; each is needed by the other; all together express the mind of Christ for men in his fellowship and service better than they could apart. They must federate; in their one organization they are federated; remaining together and co-operating they express the spirit and principles of federation in the local church, the same spirit and principles which our Lord expressed when he called together his apostles.

Within a single denomination, and frequently within a single church, are wider gaps between individuals and greater differences in understanding and in conviction than exist between the credal statements, or what may be called the center of gravity, or the average conviction, of denominations. Denominations are no longer homogeneous—perhaps they never were; now we know they are not. And it is their glory; better then do they express the spirit of Christ.